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ABSTRACT

Basic media writing courses are integral to and will become an increasingly important part of communication programs as confusion over goals and lack of focus are clarified. Currently, media writing textbooks are designed for freshman composition, rhetoric, journalism, or mass communications courses. None do an adequate job surveying all types of media writing. A comparison between freshman composition and writing for mass media is a means to establish the focus for the latter. First, good writing comes in many styles and forms. Second, objectivity is central for media writing, while opinion and persuasion are keys in freshman composition. The uses of opinion in writing for the media are highly specialized. Third, rules of usage and formats change frequently in media writing as opposed to freshman composition, in which students often have deeply imbedded notions of what is or is not correct usage. Moreover, some specific concerns about the basic media writing course include the distinctions between print and broadcast media formats, the amount of material that warrants two semesters of work, the obligation to familiarize students with the technology involved in each of the media, and the dilemma of whether to use a foundations or a formats approach. (KEH)

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# THE BASIC MEDIA WRITING COURSE

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My interest in discussing the teaching of writing as a basic requirement in a Communication major stems from the difficulties I've run into finding a textbook for the introductory writing course offered in my department--"Writing for the Mass Media," a 3-credit core requirement in the Mass Communication major at Westfield. A notable lack of focus and confusion about goals in the textbooks currently on the market led me to wonder to what extent the same problems might exist at the curricular level.

So my aim is to try and clarify the focus and goals of the basic writing course for communication by discussing 1) how it differs from general writing courses like Freshman Composition or Journalism: 2) the extent to which it is professional rather than theoretical in orientation; 3) the nature of the specific concerns it addresses; and, finally, 4) some of the issues involved in selecting textbooks for such a course. Then, for the second half of this presentation, my colleague John Paulmann will discuss his experiences in teaching the basic media writing course at Westfield.

First, I should confess that I know very little about the ways and extent to which such a course is used at other universi-

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ties and colleges. My sense is that basic media writing courses are a fairly new phenomenon. I believe very strongly that such a course is integral to communication programs and will become an increasingly important part of communication programs in the future. I suspect that part of the confusion over goals and lack of focus comes from the relative newness of such a course and the need to accommodate other writing courses--courses that predate introductory writing courses for communication programs--and the curricular concerns accompanying those other courses. More about that later.

In addition to surveying the field in search of textbooks for the required course taught in my department, I had occasion to think about the design of Writing for the Mass Media--I'll refer to the course under discussion by this title--when I reviewed a book proposal for such a course last winter for a major publisher. This is where the extent of the confusion first became clear to me. Media writing textbooks or their equivalent are designed for Freshman Comp courses, rhetoric courses, journalism courses, mass comm courses. They often try to straddle a variety of curriculum needs. Some take a "writing-for-popular-culture" approach. Others are clearly beginning journalism texts. Some mix fictional formats like scriptwriting with non-fictional, news-oriented ones. Some limit themselves to print; others to broadcast. None do an adequate job of surveying all types of media writing. Instead they tend to cover the bases in the territory that's already been staked out--often according to needs established in other fields.

The first distinction necessary is between such a course and Freshman Composition--no matter where it's taught: English Departments, Rhetoric Departments, Speech Departments, Communication Departments. I am fortunate enough to have worn a number of different professional hats, something that becomes useful in such a discussion. In my first career as a journalist, I worked as a magazine reporter and writer, advertising copywriter, public relations consultant, and newspaper editor and publisher. In addition, I taught Freshman English or its equivalent for eight years at four different universities and colleges. Now, of course, I teach Writing for the Mass Media, but also Broadcast Journalism and Criticism. To use entertainment jargon, you could say I made a double crossover. I have observed distinct differences between Freshman Comp and Writing for Mass Media.

The former emphasizes structure and analytic thinking skills. I've always felt that Freshman Comp is one of the most difficult courses to teach because it asks the instructor to teach students how to think. The emphasis is on the formulation and articulation of ideas through thesis statements and topic sentences; through organizational patterns; and through their proper development. The last in my experience is the element of writing that takes students at least four college years to master. Attempts may also be made in Freshmen Comp to address issues of style and to introduce the student to such "creative" forms as poetry and fiction.

Writing for Mass Media does not ignore the primary skills taught in Freshman Comp, but it is more apt to presume at least a minimum level of mastery. It focuses on style, objectivity, and

an understanding of the formats required by different media. It assumes organization and development skills.

Students who have difficulty with Writing for Mass Media often come into the class believing only one style of writing exists and begin their news stories with thesis statements. After all, they have just acquired this technique in Freshman Comp.

In addition, they may have little sense of the distinction between objective writing and opinion, let alone persuasive writing. They editorialize with abandon, often believing that is a form of "creativity" or at least a way to develop their point. They often have trouble understanding the differences in format between, say, print and broadcast; or advertising and public relations. None of these observations is meant to suggest that the methods of teaching Freshman Comp are lacking or that Freshman Comp should specifically prepare students for Writing for Mass Media. The comparison between Freshman Comp and Writing for the Mass Media is a way to establish the focus for the latter.

The first lesson of the comparison is that good writing comes in many styles and forms. The Freshman Comp essay model is fine, but it's not the only one, and students need to have that pointed out to them. The second lesson is that objectivity is the foundation on which writing for the media stands. Opinion and persuasion are fine, but the distinction is as absolute as you can make it and the uses of opinion in writing for the media are highly specialized. The issue of objectivity is not central to the teaching of Fresh-

man Comp, so it often takes some effort to make the students realize its importance. The third lesson to be learned from Freshman Comp is that usage rules may change when the format does--for example, the informality of broadcast is less acceptable in print. Since the Freshman Comp model is [redacted] roughly the same one used for the teaching of writing in high school, students often have deeply imbedded notions of what is or is not correct usage, from using contractions to writing in the first person.

While it might seem that a Writing for Mass Media course is closer to a Beginning Journalism course than to Freshman Comp, in several important ways, the opposite is true. I am less familiar with the curriculum base for Beginning Journalism courses, but my survey of texts tells me that the focus is on writing basic news stories for print: information gathering, organization, stylistic matters. While there are obvious overlaps, Writing for Mass Media concerns itself with a number of issues that are broader in scope, such as common principles across media and the understanding of different technologies. Writing for Mass Media requires students to conceptualize at a level that is different, and broader, than Beginning Journalism.

The "lessons" I've drawn from these Freshman Comp and Beginning Journalism comparisons address concerns that are theoretical as well as professional. The fact that writing comes in many styles and forms is not confined to the mass media, nor is the fact that usage varies according to form and purpose. Both issues can be tied to communication theory. Definitions of objectivity concern not only communication theory but educational

philosophy. There is not time to develop the connections in this paper; that is a topic for yet another presentation. Both the mastering of technology and the handling of the time dimension have theoretical ramifications. Ask anyone who teaches a Futures course in communication. Much of the debate over the professional nature of such a course seems to imply the question that it is merely professional. I think we need to look beyond that issue. It is clear that Writing for Mass Media is a course that has relevance to many students outside the Communication major or program and that that relevance will increase.

What is the nature of the specific concerns Writing for Mass Media addresses? There is really only time to pose some questions. We've already suggested some of the concerns. The major one in the area of different media formats is the distinctions between print and broadcast. Is one more basic than the other? My own inclination is to treat print formats as primary, but that may merely reflect my professional bias. In any event, where does that put new technologies like videotext? And what about areas treated like separate media, such as public relations and advertising, which in fact use both print and broadcast?

One of the issues that my institution has faced is whether or not to make Writing for the Mass Media a two-semester course. Certainly the amount of material warrants two semesters, and that way one semester could be spent on print and another on broadcast. Our particular turf dilemmas may be a useful reflection of the kinds of problems that emerge: we require of

our majors Basic Journalism as well as Writing for Mass Media. Basic Journalism, however, is taught by the English Department rather than our own, and we have not succeeded in working out an arrangement that would allow us to turn our Writing for Mass Media into a broadcast-only course. Instead, Writing for Mass Media surveys all media and overlaps with Basic Journalism. We try to remedy the mismatch by advising our students to take Writing for Mass Media before they take Basic Journalism.

More questions: to what extent is a Writing for Mass Media course obligated to familiarize students with the technology involved in each of the media? Obviously as much as possible, but issues of overlap again intrude. How should students be introduced to considerations of time? Different media operate with differing chronologies, something that in my experience students do not understand very well. Yet the differences between producing a story for a daily newspaper, an article for a magazine, or a video package for tv are considerable.

I have suggested a two-semester sequence divided between print and broadcast formats, and yet my experience in teaching Writing for Mass Media tells me that it takes many students an entire semester to understand the nature of an objective style required for newswriting. Yet I also introduce these students to editorial and reviewing styles, along with the persuasive techniques used in advertising. Would it be better to divide a two-course sequence between objective and subjective or persuasive styles of media writing?

Another set of problems revolves around whether a Writing for Mass Media course should use a foundations or a formats

approach. A foundations approach divides the course into units, which include information gathering, organization, ethical matters. Are such matters better presented through a formats approach, which integrates them into the discussion of each specific medium? The obvious answer may be to combine both approaches, but if we are concerned about a coherent, theoretically sound focus in Writing for Mass Media, combining the foundations and formats causes problems.

The last set of questions I would like to raise involve the pedagogical structure of the class. Should it be lecture or workshop or some combination of the two? My bias is for the workshop approach, but most texts available for Writing for Mass Media offer a conventional text and a workbook. Despite pretensions to being otherwise, the text usually is simplistic and redundant, giving the instructor the choice of leaving the students to their own devices or lecturing on the obvious. I find most of the available workbooks grossly inadequate. They tend to rely on homework-style assignments that have little to do with actual work of writing a story in whatever medium. Have I missed some wonderful workbook out there, or am I right in concluding that there is a serious need for workbooks that give students realistic, hands-on assignments that can be done on the spot in the classroom, stories for rewriting, multi-media campaigns?

These are the conclusions I draw about the focus and goals of the basic communication writing course. First, the need to emphasize the underlying theoretical issues like objectivity and technology seems clear to me. Second, such a course must not be

limited to meeting the most specialized professional needs of those within the program, but think of itself as an introduction in a broader sense for many kinds of students. Third, Writing for Mass Media must be conceptualized in terms of how it fits in with other institution-wide requirements like Freshman Comp. To summarize: theory, theory, theory!

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